

Q: This is oral history number 422. The following oral history interview was conducted by Commander Bill Scullion for the Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC, and Karen Burn for the National Park Service USS Arizona Memorial at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, Hawaii, on December 6, 2001 at 7:22 p.m. The person being interviewed is William John Ray, who was a Seaman First Class on the USS Pennsylvania on December 7, 1941. Did I get that right, Mr. Ray?

William John Ray: I would say so, yes.

Q: Okay. For the record, please state your full name, place of birth and date of birth.

William John Ray: William John Ray, New Orleans, L- Louisiana. Uh.. I was born uhm.. boy, <laughs> 3/22 uh.. 3/11/22.

Q: And what did you consider to be your hometown in 1941?

William John Ray: New Orleans, Louisiana.

Q: What were your parents' names?

William John Ray: Uh.. William John Ray and Alma Ada Bodie [ph?].

Q: How many brothers and sisters did you have or do you have?

William John Ray: We have uh.. my brothers was Louis, Peter, George and my sister was Alma, so we had three brothers and two sis- uh.. one sister.

Q: Okay. And where did you go to high school?

William John Ray: Uh.. Fort Garry, Louisiana.

Q: Where and why did you enlist?

William John Ray: Well, it was the Depression at that time and I couldn't get into anything else. I was uh.. delivering prescriptions from _____ in Louisiana, New Orleans, Louisiana for five cents a package. So I tried to get into the CCCs. The CCCs would not accept- uh.. accept me because I was making too much money, like 12 bucks uh.. a day. And so I thought I would try the navy and I joined the navy.

Q: Where did you join the navy?

William John Ray: In Ni- in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Q: And when was that?

William John Ray: Uh.. 4/8/40.

Q: That from filling out all those forms, right?

William John Ray: Sir?

Q: 4/8/40, was that from filling out all those forms?

William John Ray: Yeah. It was 4/8/40.

Q: Where did you go to basic?

William John Ray: Uh.. San Diego.

Q: And when did you get to the USS Pennsylvania?

William John Ray: Hmm. Well, about eight weeks after that, after basic training.

Q: Okay. So you joined her in San Diego?

William John Ray: What's that?

Q: You joined ship's company in San Diego?

William John Ray: No.

Q: Okay. Where did you join up?

William John Ray: Uh.. in Hawaii. They sent us on an aircraft Enterprise to- from uh.. San Diego to uh.. Sa- uh.. Hawaii. But y- you know, at that time, all this crap about uh.. stuff, they had signs in San Diego, 'Sailors are dogs; stay off the lawn' in 1940. So anyhow, that was there. And then I went to San- uh.. to Hawaii on the Enterprise and I uh.. went aboard the USS Pennsylvania.

Q: What division were you assigned to?

William John Ray: Fourth Division.

Q: What were your duties?

William John Ray: Uh.. actually, gunners were made striker at that time.

Q: What was life like on the Pennsylvania?

William John Ray: Well, I enjoyed it very much. Uh.. did a lot of things that I'd like to tell you, but uh.. at this time uh.. I don't think I will. We went across the equator about that time uh.. right after I joined the Pennsylvania and uh.. President Roosevelt's son was aboard the ship and he was a marine, Franklin Roosevelt. And we went ac- across the equator and I guess he- he was a big man and he uh.. I imagine thought that he was pretty tough, but uh.. they beat the living heck out of him uh.. going across the equator. And I think they might have put him in place.

Q: I would have enjoyed that.

William John Ray: <laughs>. I'm a shellback now. I've been across the equator.

Q: I've got my card too. We can compare later.

William John Ray: Okay. Okay. <laughs>.

Q: I've got the scars on my knees to prove it.

William John Ray: Yeah. <laughs>.

Q: Let me ask you a question we've kind of been asking everybody else. What were you doing December 6?

William John Ray: December 6? Boy. I don't think much really. Uh.. December 6, I was just staying aboard ship. That's about it.

Q: And where was the ship located at that time?

William John Ray: Uh.. well, we had a uh.. peculiar situation. Ad- Admiral Kimball was on our ship, the Pennsylvania, and we were den- uh.. docked 1010.

Q: In the drydock?

William John Ray: No, no. Just hold on a minute.

Q: Okay.

William John Ray: We were docked 1010 on Saturday and it seems as though uh.. the engineering officer at that time said we should go and get our uh.. rudder or propellers repaired. And I guess the Japanese spy, uh.. Owa-Awa- Aia [ph?], called in to Japan that we were at dock 1010. But that was on a- like a Saturday or so.

Q: Like a week before?

William John Ray: Uh.. no, not a week before, a couple day, you know? And we moved the next day into the uh.. drydock. And so they- they didn't have time enough to report to Japan that we had moved. And then the Oglala, He- Helena move in- into our sp- our spot there. So uh.. it's hard to explain all this stuff, but uhm.. anyhow, we went into drydock. And uh.. during the- the attack, uh.. they did attack the Helena and the Oglala at 1010. And we didn't get too much over at the drydock. We did get one bomb, armor piercing, that came in and hit us and killed about 29 on our P-ship, Pennsylvania. And lucky it hit the five-inch breach of a gun. And if it not, it would have gone down to our magazines and it would have exploded into the same thing as the Arizona, but lucky it hit that breach of the five-inch fifty-one which are broadsides. So uh.. we were very lucky in a lot of respects.

Q: Okay. Mr. Ray, let's talk about your experience, personal experience on the Pennsylvania.

William John Ray: My experience <laughs> I'd like to say..

Q: Well, on December 7.

William John Ray: Yeah, <laughs> on December 7. I'd like to say these things really. Uh.. I was reading the paper and naturally I was making 21 dollars a month. I'd like to say I was reading the stock market report, but I wasn't. I was reading the funny papers <laughs> out there. <laughs>. I- I didn't have enough- not enough money to make the stock market. So anyhow, I- I was reading uh.. the paper and all of a sudden, the explosion went off and somebody said, "Oh, they're dynamiting out in the- in the channel." And so that didn't really bother me too much. So about a minute later, another explosion went off and it was close to our ship so it kind of shook us a little. And so I said, "It's an earthquake, an earthquake." That kind of caught my attention, uh.. so I went up on the top side and there, when I went up on the top side, I could see explosions over on the battleship row on that side and then I could see the Japanese planes coming very low, 50 feet or 60 feet high, coming in to those battleship row mostly, not to our ship. And about that time, our bugler was supposed to blow general quarters. Well, he was blowing chow call, uh.. liberty call; he was just blowing as far I was concerned. He wa- he was confused. And so about that time, I figured

well, something's going on, so I went to my 14-inch guns. And I was a loader. I wasn't the main loader, but I was the assistant loader on the 14..

Q: What turret was that?

William John Ray: On a 14-inch gun. So I went back there and we loaded the 14-inch guns. The- the order came to load the 14-inch guns, which we did. <clears throat>.

Q: Which turret?

William John Ray: Uh.. four, turret four. I was in the Fourth Division. So about that time, something came over there to unload the 14-inch guns. Now I don't know if you know ab- too much about the 14-inch guns and the silk powder bags, but when you unload those things, it makes you pucker. Uh.. it was terrible. I didn't- I was there helping unload it, but when you do- do that, it's a very prestigious uh.. it's- well anything can happen and a- a spark could go off and that's the end of everybody. So we unloaded and then they told us to go to our turret to help wherever we could help 'cause they were- were not gonna shoot the 14-inch guns. So they told us to go- we were in drydock and the Cassin and Downes was in front of us and they got blown all to bits. Then they told myself and our turret four to go down to the drydock. They put a rope around me and lowered me down <cries> with another rope to tie on the bodies. And then they did pull 'em up. <cries>. And so that's what I did.

Q: How long were you doing that?

William John Ray: Oh, half an hour I guess in that respect. And after that, after we got all those bodies from the Cassin and Downes out, we came up and they said, "Well, go into the compartment where the bomb had hit the Pennsylvania which killed about 29 uh.. marines mostly. We had uh.. five-five-inch fifty-ones which were broadsides and that's where that bomb hit. So with that, they took me up there and said, "Clean up this uh.. situation." I don't want to use the word mess, but situation. And they gave me uh.. a shovel, uh.. a wire brush and a scraper and I s- shoveled up the bodies and put 'em in buckets. And then on the bulkheads, we took a scraper and a wire brush to clean off all the- the very small particles of bodies. And it just- that's about what I did that day.

Q: Okay. And that was after the second wave, the cleanup process?

William John Ray: It uh.. it- yeah.

Q: Okay. That was afterwards then.

William John Ray: Yeah. I can't really remember first wave or second wave. I don't remember that too much.

Q: Were you in number four turret the whole time of the attack?

William John Ray: No, no. I- after- after, we took us- after we unloaded, they told us to go clean 'em up, you know, do this other job.

Q: During the attack?

William John Ray: During the attack, yeah, yeah. But we went down in the drydock, did that, and then after that, go clean up this other bunch, the marines uh.. in the five-inch fifty-one.

Q: Okay. How many people helped you with that duty?

William John Ray: I don't know. I really don't know. We just- we just did it.

Q: After that detail was done, did you take time to look around the harbor to see what was going on?

William John Ray: Well, maybe I did. I can't remember. I really- the only thing I can <laughs> say at this time, uhm.. about 11:30, they told us to have uh.. lunch and they had sandwiches and an apple and soup. Okay. The- and oh, boy. Uh.. after we finished eating the apple, the lunch, the sal- the sandwiches and the soup, and naturally when you make soup, you make it very early in the morning. And this cook that was doing the soup, it was hit- the bomb hit around there and his arm went in the bottom of the soup. Well, whe- when they got to the bottom of the soup, they said they found his

arm. So it took me about 12 years to be able to eat what I call soup. So that was about it.

Q: Okay. Now do I remember correctly that the Pennsylvania was the sister ship of the Arizona?

William John Ray: Yes. Yeah.

Q: Did you see the Arizona after the day?

William John Ray: Sir?

Q: Did you see the Arizona after the attack?

William John Ray: No.

Q: No? You're not able to recall anything about that?

William John Ray: No. As far as over- it was quite a ways uh.. away from us. We were in drydock on this side and they were way over here.

Q: What about the Cassin and the Downes? Did you see anything over there?

William John Ray: Well, they were in f- uh.. right in- in our drydock, the Cassin and Downes. And the shore was a little over in another drydock.

Q: Right. Was the drydock flooded at some point during the battle?

William John Ray: Yes. I always- yes, it was. Yeah, it- because as the oil came out of the Cassin and Downes, it caught on fire and it was making our uh.. powder go on fire. It was getting too hot and so they flooded the- the dry dock.

Q: What's the best memory you have about serving on the Pennsylvania?

William John Ray: Hmm. I enjoyed the Pennsylvania. Uh.. I kid around a lot about having uh.. ice cream, uh.. you know, uh.. strawberry, vanilla and chocolate. If we were- if we ran out of chocolate ice cream, we'd come back into port. That's only kidding around. I mean but it was a good ship. And Admiral Kimball, you see, I was standing about 10 feet away in- in June I guess when Admiral uh.. Kimball recei- uh.. reveal- uhm.. changed command of Admiral Richardson. And Admiral Richardson, uh.. he told Roosevelt that uh.. this Pearl Harbor was a death trap. And it seemed as though Admiral uh.. President Roosevelt didn't like that so he changed Admiral Richardson and gave command to Admiral Richardson uh.. Kimball. And I was standing about 10 feet and Admiral- at the change of command and Admiral Richardson told Kimball uh.. "This is a death trap. Keep the fleet out." And I would say from that time on, Admiral Kimball kept the fleet out uh.. two-thirds out, one-third coming back in to uh.. recreational and refueling and stuff like that. And he did that from June till about November. Uhm.. and around- being on the flagship Pennsylvania, naturally the radio operators and that, they get information and the scuttlebuck uh.. scuttlebutt was the Japanese fleet was out look- anyhow going out. Uh.. so I knew that in maybe November uh.. as a seaman. So I imagine that the Admiral and President Roosevelt knew a little more than I knew I hope <laughs>, but anyhow, uh..

Q: What was the scuttlebutt about where the Japanese fleet was going?

William John Ray: Uh.. I didn't know that. They didn't know. They just knew that the Japanese fleet was out. Now here's another thing, uh.. Commander. In 1937, they had war games and..

Q: Yeah, I'm aware of those.

William John Ray: Yeah. Okay. I'll go with this if you don't mind. And uh.. in 1937, uh.. this uh.. group came up, I don't know if it was a commander or a captain, said the best way to attack Pearl Harbor was to go up north because we always sent our proo- troops uh.. our planes out to the west. Go up north and come down from the we- north and be on a Sunday morning at 8:00 in the morning, church, a lot of other things, and th- the Japanese people followed that plan. So I don't blame 'em <laughs> if that's the correct way to do it, that- that's what they should do. So anyhow, uh.. and I'm just a seaman, you know, so uh.. I don't know too much about that junk. But uh.. we have the same thing today really. I live in Arizona. We have one of the most powerful nuclear reactors in Arizona. Now do we tell these people how

to uh.. come in there and attack that uh.. nuclear reactor uh.. in Arizona, like make out that you're a covered wagon or something like that on a- on a Thursday or some Saturday? I don't know. But the same thing cra- uh.. crap is the same thing. And we should be aware of this. And history- as far as I'm concerned, history is his story and 2000 years ago, these people said what's going on. And we don't understand history. And history repeats itself to a certain degree and people should be aware of this. Now like the Cole over there. If I was a commander of that damn destroyer, I would not have- I would have had my motor launch out there a hundred feet, a hundred uh.. two hundred feet with a machinegun. You're not gonna come close to my ship.

Q: Yup. Mr. Ray, I'm gonna turn some questions over to Ms. Burn. Ms. Burn wants to ask you some questions.

Q2: Just a couple more questions on what you know.

William John Ray: Sure.

Q2: After 1941, when was the next time that you were at Pearl Harbor?

William John Ray: After '41? Uh..

Q: Yeah, after '41.

William John Ray: Hmm. Whoo. Maybe I came back after the war. I just uh.. you mean in route back uh.. I was at Okinawa. Another thing too, on the Pennsylvania, we were at Okin- I was- I left the ship, but the Pennsylvania was at Okinawa in- in uh.. the last day of the war. And that ship, the Pennsylvania, was supposed to be the ship to sign the surrender because they wanted to show the Japanese here's an old battleship over here and you're gonna uh.. kowtow to it. <coughs>. The last day of the war in Buckner Bay in Okla- uhm.. oh, what the hell. Uh.. it was hit by a kamikaze uh.. at that time. And so the Pennsylvania was- said, "Hey, we can't take that ship to uh.. Japan." President Truman said, "Hey, send the O- uh.. the uh.. Missouri." And that was a little uh.. history type of thing uh.. at Buckner Bay, Okla- uh..

Q: Okinawa.

William John Ray: Okinawa. And uh.. so things happen like that. But uh.. the- the Pennsylvania was supposed to have the signing till she got hit the last day of the uh.. war in Buckner Bay in..

Q: Okinawa.

William John Ray: Okinawa. I put about 48 days. <laughs>. I can't remember that name. I was on DE at that time on- on picket duty out there.

Q2: So this is the first time you've really been back to visit.

William John Ray: Not here.

Q2: Not here?

William John Ray: No. I- I was here I think a couple of times.

Q2: Okay. Have you been out to the Arizona Memorial?

William John Ray: Yeah, I was out there yesterday and it was very touching.

Q2: Hard to go out there?

William John Ray: Yes. And I think- but I tr- uh.. I'm 80 years old now and it's really uh.. I think back if I was 19 years old and I was uh.. dead or snuffed out, whatever you want to call it, I wouldn't have had a wife, five kids, my whole life would have been just a different thing. So I- I really <laughs> think of that lately obviously when I get to th- this age.

Q2: Right. So when you go out there, it makes you really feel grateful for what you have?

William John Ray: Oh yeah. Oh yes, definitely. And to see the oil coming out of the Oklahoma and there are still bodies in there, yes.

Q2: Since 1941, have you ever really talked about your experience?

William John Ray: Yes.

Q2: You have?

William John Ray: Oh yes, I have. I've been in Arizona and we go to schools and we make speeches and talks and tell them about Pearl Harbor. And it- it's a really a shame that uh.. history is not being taught in school and because it does repeat itself to a certain degree. And uh.. President Bush is coming out with some certain program for veterans to go and talk into schools and I'm gonna write him and tell him about our program in Arizona and the talks that we do because I think they should know, the people. Like I told you before, history repeats itself. And it's uh.. like this last thing with the uh.. Bin Laden.

Q: September 11.

William John Ray: Uh.. September 11. Okay. He sent these people over here months ahead of time on a credit card. They stayed in motels. They st- they went to Boston, took the plane on credit cards, travelled across the country timing uh.. what time did they leave Boston, what time will they be in New York and stuff like that. Uh.. it didn't cost him hardly anything. Uh.. <clears throat> the plane full of gas ran into the- the towers. It didn't cost him anything. So that whole procedure when it happened didn't cost him too much. Now I just came back from Russia in June and when I got back home in June, I got a call from my credit card. "Mr. Ray, uh.. you know, you- something- somebody's spending a lot of money in Russia. Uh.. were you there?" I said, "Yes." Now the crap that they can do for me, a little peon, check on me, and all those people are spending their big money, they can't do that. The other thing is I came into Arizona, Phoenix and my wife bought some caviar over in Russia, one can, like the size of a damn tuna can. When we came through, she put down the- that caviar, went through the guy, the last thing he asked us, "Do you have any food?" We said, "No." All of a sudden, he hit the ceiling. "What do you mean? You got caviar." And he really put us through the three uh.. third de- degree because I'm a blonde,

blue-eyed uh.. profile and these goddamn uh.. excuse me, these other people, uh.. they- if they get caught, they- they scream, "Oh, he- they're profiling me." Well they profiled me. And I'm not a uh.. okay, I don't- I have no problem with that uh.. if they do that, uh.. but these other people get away with crap and it's about time that this stuff stopped to a certain degree. Uh.. if it- if we are Americans, we are Americans. And I'm not afraid if somebody listening to my phone calls, my cell or tell cells or whatever the hell it- it is, uh.. I don't do anything wrong, but if they want to listen to it, fine. And these other people say it's against our something, I don't know, but uh..

Q: That's okay. I think we've got another question for you.

William John Ray: Okay.

Q2: I just wanted to follow up with you going out to the schools. That's obviously good for the students to be able to hear the stories of what happened during the war. Has that been a good experience for you? Has it helped you to go out and talk about it over the years?

William John Ray: I don't know if it really helps me. Yes, I like to tell my story if that's the ca- uh.. the answer. But I went to a juvenile uh.. prison.

Q: Detention centers?

William John Ray: Huh?

Q: A detention center?

William John Ray: A detention center for- for juvies from nine years to fifteen. And after I got talking, these kids, one at the age of twelve, came up to me and asked me how does it feel..

<audio ends abruptly>.

End of Tape 422 William John Ray